

**Submission  
No 9**

## **VOLUNTEERING AND UNPAID WORK PLACEMENTS AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW**

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**Submission by NSW Rural Fire Service**  
*for*  
**Parliamentary Inquiry into volunteering and unpaid work placements among  
children and young people in NSW**  
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**NSW Rural Fire Service History**

Following a lengthy Coronial Inquiry into the fires of 1993-4, the NSW State Government introduced legislation creating for the first time, a single rural fire service with a single chain of command. *The Rural Fires Act 1997* was proclaimed on 1 September 1997.

The establishment of the *Rural Fires Act 1997* saw the transfer of local government staff working in Fire Control Centres transferred to State Government employment.

Prior to the 1 September 1997 the NSW Rural Fire Service was known as the NSW Bush Fire Service.

For more specific information about the RFS' history go to:

[http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/dsp\\_content.cfm?cat\\_id=1127](http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/dsp_content.cfm?cat_id=1127)

**Legislation and Regulation**

The NSW RFS has fire management responsibilities for over 95 per cent of the landmass of the State.

The NSW RFS is the leading agency for coordinated bush firefighting in NSW; the Commissioner of the NSW RFS reports directly to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. The organisation is governed by the *Rural Fires Act, 1997* and the *Rural Fires Regulation 2013*; both pieces of legislation incorporate volunteers and volunteer rural fire brigades.

The legislation provides for the establishment of NSW RFS Service Standards which outline the policies and standard operating procedures that governs members. Additionally, as a NSW Government agency, staff members are covered by the Public Sector Employment and Management Act 2002 and other associated legislation.

While all NSW RFS volunteers and staff are members of the Service, there are some complexities in regard to the application of standards, policies and legislation, for example:

1. Legislation and Awards related to employment apply to RFS staff members only. For example, Crown Employees (Public Service Conditions of Employment) Award 2009, Public Sector Employment and Management Act, 2002 (and associated regulation), personnel handbook and so forth.
2. All government departments' legislation related to public officials / employees applies to staff members. There is an added complexity in that some will also apply to our volunteer membership, for example health, safety welfare requirements, some ombudsman reporting, GIPPA to name a few.
3. Service Standards: apply to all members of the NSW RFS. The exception applies when employment conditions are referenced (see 1 above). For example, our discipline Service Standard only applies to volunteers because the disciplinary arrangements within the PSEM Act apply to all staff as state government employees.
4. NSW RFS policies apply to staff only as they are generally specific to employment arrangements, conditions and requirements.
5. The NSW RFS has a series of Incident and Operational Management Procedures which apply to staff and volunteers when working in an operational capacity. The content of these procedures document the structure, roles, protocols and workflows during operational activity.

### **Role of Volunteers**

NSW RFS volunteers have been protecting local communities from bush and grass fires for more than 100 years. Volunteers attend a range of emergencies like bush and grass fires, house and structure fires, road accidents as well as providing assistance at other events like floods, storms and searches. Volunteers fight fires in over 95 per cent of NSW and are responsible for property protection in about 1,200 towns and villages.

Along with firefighting, NSW RFS volunteers fulfil a range of other roles in areas such as community education, training, radio communications, catering, logistics, youth development, aviation support and planning.

## **Structure**

Due to the nature of the work the NSW RFS undertakes, the organisation has a hierarchical, or chain of command structure. This gives effect to the management and resolution of day to day matters at the local level and the operational command and control structure common to the emergency services sector.

Volunteers form part of the chain of command, with each brigade consisting of a Captain who is supported by one or more Deputy Captains. The most senior volunteer in the NSW RFS is a Group Officer. Group Officers provide operational and managerial leadership and advice to brigades. They participate in the management of the district through the provision of advice and guidance to the district manager on all issues effecting brigades, volunteers and the RFS. Group officers also participate in the management of the district, by way of membership on the district senior management team.

From Group Officer, the chain of command escalates according to the organisational chart.

### **Brigades (volunteers):**

Brigades fulfil the incident response role of the NSW RFS. Most emergencies that occur in rural fire districts will be attended by a rural fire brigade as either the lead agency or a support agency. The number of brigades in each district varies depending on population densities, the number of properties and other assets needing protection, and geography.

Rural fire brigades are often based in local stations, which house firefighting vehicles, equipment and sometimes catering and communications areas. The stations are a local meeting point during emergencies as well as being the focus of training and social activities for volunteers at quieter times.

Each brigade has a constitution and many are registered as a charity. The administration of the brigade is usually carried out by the President, Vice-President, Treasurer and Secretary, assisted by members.

**Districts and Zones (staff):**

RFS staff located in local Fire Control Centres (or district, teams or zone offices) assist volunteers and brigades to prepare for and respond to operational incidents. Our fire management responsibilities are effectively discharged through Rural Fire Districts which are generally based on local government boundaries. In some areas, neighbouring rural fire districts have agreed to pool resources, joining together both operationally and administratively to form teams or zones. This process enables cost effective use of resources and skills.

A Fire Control Centre forms the administrative and operational base of the rural fire district/s. The coordination and management of local brigade responses to fire and other incidents – including natural disasters, motor vehicle accidents and other civil emergencies – is undertaken through the Fire Control Centre.

**Regions (staff):**

New South Wales is divided into four regions (east, north, south and west). The primary focus of the Regional office is to assist in the management of Districts in regard to operational activity, some financial, business and human resource related matters, mitigation, events, training, and to ensure that statutory obligations are met together with RFS policies and standards. The Regional Manager has the responsibility of leading and managing the business affairs of the NSW RFS within the Region.

**Customer Service Centres (Staff):**

In late 2010, the NSW Government announced a range of measures in response to the Victorian Royal Commission recommendations. During the same period, a number of reforms to create a more efficient and transparent planning system were implemented. In response to these reforms, the NSW RFS established three Customer Service Centres (Coffs Harbour, Glendenning and Batemans Bay) that are responsible, in conjunction with local district staff, for delivering a range of programs and services. These include development assessment and planning; community protection planning and the Hotspots program.

**Headquarters (staff):**

The NSW RFS Headquarters, located at Lidcombe, has four Directorates. Each of these is headed by a Director. The Directorates are:

- Executive Services

- Infrastructure Services
- Membership & Strategic Services
- Operational Services

Headquarters is responsible for the strategic direction and overall administration of the NSW RFS. The development of policies, standards and strategies, the administration of the Rural Fire Fighting Fund, management of membership matters and applications, design and provision of fire fighting equipment to Brigades, development and oversight of training for members are just a few examples of its functions.

Additionally, Headquarters has a response and coordination role. The State Operations Centre provides readiness, command and control, coordination, liaison and support services across the state during periods of major bush fire activity.

### **Workforce (as at 30 June 2013)**

Total staff: 846  
 Total volunteers: 71,976

Breakdown of volunteers 25 years and younger:

Age Range	Female	Male	Total
Under 16 years	135	286	421
16 – 17 years	267	709	976
18 – 25 years	1,666	5,386	7,052

### **Other key statistics**

Number of brigades: 2,031  
 Rural Fire Districts: 126  
 District/Zones/Teams: 48  
 Regional Offices: 4  
 HQ: 1

## **Existing policies relating to volunteering and unpaid work placements among children and young people in NSW**

Volunteering for young people within emergency services has been a government focus which has translated into support for membership and school programs at a local level across the state.

### **NSW 2021: A plan to make NSW Number One**

- Goal 28: Ensure NSW is ready to deal with major emergencies and natural disasters.
  - Target: Defend against suburban and Bushland fires. Increase community resilience to the impact of fires through prevention and preparedness activities. Enhance volunteer training programs with a particular focus on cadet training schemes
  - Priority actions: Training an additional 4000 secondary school children through the NSW RFS School Cadets Program by 2016

### **NSW Rural Fire Service Corporate Plan 2011 – 2015**

The Corporate Plan establishes organisational goals and targets and assists in determining priorities.

Key Focus Areas and Objectives

- KFA 4: Value and Support our Members
  - 4.1: A safe working culture
  - 4.2: A diverse, flexible and adaptive membership that is representative of the community
  - 4.3: Informed, engaged and valued members

2013 – 2014 Milestones

- At least 800 Secondary School Students complete the Secondary School Cadet Program
- Updated volunteer recruitment and retention program developed and implemented.

### **NSW Rural Fire Service – Organisational Values**

Underpinning the Corporate Plan are our organisational values and commitment to the principles of flexible membership - which aims to attract and retain a diverse membership who can participate in a variety of roles.

## **Measures to encourage volunteering and foster opportunities for volunteering among children and young people in NSW, including possible incentives to volunteer**

Children and young people play an important role within the NSW RFS and in local communities. Participation in NSW RFS activities can help children and young people connect with their community and develop a sense of social responsibility and service.

Being part of the NSW RFS can also build qualities of leadership, self discipline, self reliance, initiative and team work. For the NSW RFS, the participation of children and young people, as tomorrow's leaders, helps us to ensure our workforce is resilient, so we can continue to protect our communities into the future.

### **Membership**

Young People can volunteer with the NSW RFS as members and participate in youth development programs between the ages of 12 and 18 years as a:

- a) **Junior Member:** a member of a Brigade (other than a Cadet Brigade) aged between 12 years and up to 18 years of age who is not an Ordinary/Probationary Member.
- b) **Ordinary/Probationary Member:** a member of a Brigade (other than a Cadet Brigade) aged 16 years of age and over who has met their brigade's constitutional requirement for membership and is defined as current on the NSW RFS system located at Headquarters. Between 16 and 18 these members, once the minimum training has been completed, can attend fires/emergency incidents subject to certain limitations including consent of a parent or guardian.
- c) **Cadet:** a member of a Cadet Brigade, or participant in a specific Cadet or youth development program (i.e. Secondary Schools Cadet Program), aged between 12 years and up to 18 years of age.

The NSW RFS takes its responsibilities to provide a child-safe and child-friendly environment seriously. For this reason, we leave it up to each Brigade to determine their capacity to supervise, mentor and develop young people. This may mean some Rural Fire Brigades limit the number of young people in their brigade. Similarly, a Brigade may also raise their minimum age requirement so their programs are age appropriate.



A Brigade that does not have the capacity to provide suitable supervisory arrangements or youth programs may elect not to accept members under the age of 18.

## **Programs**

Youth programs in the NSW RFS are primarily coordinated and delivered by our volunteers, therefore the availability of these personnel will determine the type of programs held in any given area. We also encourage our members to tailor and schedule programs to suit their local area.

Typically, young people are able to volunteer in the following programs within the NSW RFS:

- a) **Junior Member Program:** training developed and delivered to Junior Members at local Brigade level.
- b) **Cadet Brigade Program:** training developed and delivered to Cadets at Cadet Brigades.
- c) **Secondary Schools Cadet Program:** short term program for Year 9 and 10 students (delivered at secondary schools).
- d) **Youth Development Program:** all other fire awareness, fire fighting, and community education programs specifically targeting young people aged 12 – 18 years for development and recruitment purposes delivered outside a Brigade structure.

Each program has the aim to:

- Develop an interest in the NSW RFS and its traditions
- Provide young people with a knowledge of fire safety and preparedness
- Develop the qualities of leadership, self-discipline, self reliance, initiative and team work
- Encourage young people to continue service in the NSW RFS or other community service organisations
- Provide training that can contribute to NSW RFS fire fighter and other specialist training.

Under the supervision and direction of authorised brigade members, Junior and Cadet Members can learn practical skills including:

- Safety
- Operating pumps, hoses, knapsack sprays and hand tools
- Communicating on different types of radios
- Providing casualty assistance
- Using fire extinguishers
- Navigating and reading maps

- Identifying hazards in their home and community
- Team work

As well as learn the theory behind:

- Fire behaviour
- A fire fighters role in the community
- The roles of other emergency services i.e. Ambulance, Police, SES
- Fire fighting techniques
- Types of fire
- Different fire fighting appliances
- Fire safety at home

## **Best practice in supporting and promoting safe opportunities for volunteering and unpaid work placements among children and young people in other jurisdictions, both in Australia and overseas**

The NSW RFS has established a working group to implement a range of initiatives relating to best practice when working with children.

Further, the NSW RFS has a range of Service Standards relating to the participation of youth within the organisation, these include:

- Service Standard 2.1.5 Child and Youth Participation in NSW RFS Activities
- Service Standard 1.1.9 Child Related Activities (to be updated in 2014)
- Incident Management Procedure 8.03.01.02 (1) – participation of members under 18 years of age on out of area responses.

These Service Standards are supported by:

- Service Standard 1.1.7 Code of Conduct and Ethics – relevant to all members, including youth.
- Service Standard 1.1.2 Discipline
- Service Standard 1.1.3 Grievances
- Service Standard 1.1.21 Stand down and removal of membership and notification of criminal charges and convictions

- Service Standard 6.1.5 Live Fire (relevant as it outlines the parameters surrounding exposure to live fire for all members, including junior members).
- Service Standard 1.2.1 Rank and Insignia (relevant as it outlines the rank and insignia for Cadets)
- Service Standard 2.1.2 Brigade Constitution – provides the opportunity for Brigades to have junior membership.
- Service Standard 6.1.2 Qualifications for NSW RFS members - references functions and qualifications relevant to junior membership.
- Secondary School Cadet Program Manual
- Working with Young People Course (consists of components of the Certificate IV in Youth Work and familiarises members with best practise, engagement techniques, legislation and program development and delivery for young people.)

In addition, the following Service Standards and resources are in development:

- Youth Participation Manual (to support Service Standard 2.1.5) – estimated to be complete and distributed by mid 2014.
- Service Standard providing instruction on the reporting of child related issues.

## **The role of the Commission for Children and Young People and the Office of the Children’s Guardian in supporting and promoting safe volunteering and unpaid work placement opportunities among children and young people in NSW**

The CCYP and OCG have been instrumental in assisting the NSW RFS to develop our Youth Participation Service Standard and (draft) Manual. Both resources aim to encompass the key best practice principals promoted by the CCYP and OCG. Drafts of the Youth Participation Manual have been reviewed by the CCYP.

## **Providing the NSW Government with advice on how it can better engage with and support children and young people in volunteering and unpaid work placements**

### **Challenges**

- The balance between providing opportunities to participate in meaningful volunteering opportunities against that of safety and protection.
- At times, addressing the preconceived ideas of adults associated with working with youth.
- Identifying willing adult supervisors available to run programs especially in rural areas
- Intergenerational interaction – striking the balance between traditional/cultural practices of older members versus that of the younger members.
- Implementing changes to legislation in a workforce comprising of staff and volunteers.